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LOVING RUSSIA

“Loving Dostoyevsky, what is one to do—what is a Jew to do—
with the knowledge that he hated Jews?”

—Susan Sontag

RUSSIA LOVE

THEY’VE BEEN CALLING us bad names in the Russian press, those of us who support Ukraine against the Russian invasion. I read that Dmitry Medvedev, the former president and prime minister whose vocabulary, if not his ideas, seem to have shrunk with age, had labeled us degenerates and bastards. All for our supposed anti-Russian sentiments. A commentary from the summer of 2022 in the *Corriere della Sera* suggested to Mr. Medvedev that, if he wanted to find anti-Russian sentiments, he should look no further than the great Russian authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹ This is of course not quite true. While it is possible to find plenty of anti-government ideas in Russian literary works, some of them quite trenchant even when they are hidden, the authors who produced them were basically all staunch patriots. They loved Russia, which was the basis of their opposition. They looked at their country and saw ineptitude if not evil in its rulers. This pained them deeply, and so they wrote, and their fellow patriots composed, painted, sculpted, sang, choreographed, and danced. I love what they created, but it’s not that simple.

In the summer of 2014, while we visited my spouse’s family in Japan, my father-in-law decided I should see the sand dunes of Tottori. We set out in the early morning, me, as always, a bit nervous in the passenger seat as he sped toward the coast, where we arrived relatively without incident in time for lunch at a local udon-ya. The dunes were impressively dunelike, piling up in thirty-foot hills alongside the beach. It was blustery, and we quickly wore ourselves out from going up and down them, so we rinsed off our feet, slipped on our sandals, and set out for Tottori’s sand museum. Before the entrance, I felt my knees give way a little as I recognized a sand-fashioned giant from the Viktor Vasnetsov painting *Knight at the Crossroads*. The horse’s long mane drooped toward the earth, and the knight’s spear—it is an infantryman’s spear, not a knight’s lance—flowed outward from the rider toward a skeleton on the

ground, beside a sign whose words I knew without reading them: “If you go straight, you will not live.” In we went.

I was surprised at how long it took me to get my bearings. These were just sand sculptures, impressive, yes—made by teams from around the world with devotion and skill, part of that year’s national theme—but why was my heart thumping? Why did my eyes keep welling up with tears?

I stopped in front of a half-frozen Napoleon, a string of half-dead soldiers just behind him, then before a majestic mammoth trampling a paleolithic hunter while other hunters surrounded it with spears, then a Catherine the Great, her gown flowing, before a sprawling neoclassical facade, then a bespectacled old gentleman surrounded by dogs, who I knew was Pavlov before I looked at the inscription, then a group of ballerinas and a dapper Diaghilev. There were Mongols laughing at the tribute placed before them by peasants with heads bowed, a series of icons including a Virgin of Tenderness and Rublev’s *Old Testament Trinity*, Cossacks on leaping horses, their backwords lifted high in the air, a St. Basil’s with a Kremlin panorama, a shipwright Peter, a line of matryoshka dolls, a hammer and sickle, a cosmonaut. A bearded Tolstoy held a big book whose pages seemed to spiral ever outward. I found myself holding my breath. I made my way through and then went back again, while my family waited patiently. In a small courtyard there was a cat that held on to a dog, that held on to a child, that held on to an old woman, that held on to an old man, who was trying to pull an enormous turnip from the ground. Image after image struck me, and I realized my reaction was not just one of surprised recognition, it was much more than that. It was love.

That could have been that, I suppose. I could have smiled and moved on. But loving Russia is complicated. And in the summer of 2014, like today, loving Russia wasn’t the sort of thing one could do without a second thought. You ask yourself why and how could you, as if there was something to feel guilty about. And then again, why shouldn’t I, and what’s wrong with feeling this way? Isn’t it normal to love a place, a people, a culture one has spent many years studying, writing and thinking about, and teaching to others? Wasn’t this Dante’s *grande amore*, the thing that he paired so naturally with *il lungo studio*? Wouldn’t it be much worse if you didn’t love what you had devoted so much of your life to?

Viewing these delicate, perishable sculptures, I was reminded of Mikhail Bulgakov’s famous line from *The Master and Margarita*, “Manuscripts don’t burn.” In the novel’s fantastical context, delivered by Satan

himself no less, the pronouncement cannot help but strike contemporary readers as at best overly hopeful. In practice, manuscripts do burn, even in Russia, maybe especially there. We know of the ones saved from the flames, and these might suggest to the hopefully inclined some sliver of providence where manuscripts are concerned, let alone great art, or great artists. But still, how can you not love a line like that?

When Ian Frazier, in his 2010 *Travels in Siberia*, writes repeatedly of what he calls “Russia love,” I suspect he is actually diagnosing a type, of which I am an exemplar. While what he describes as a kind of magical, enchanted fascination is not the sort of superficial attraction one might easily dismiss (it allowed him to write a substantial book over some sixteen years, after all), still, it does not make me feel especially good. In part because, really, who wants to be an exemplar? But, even more really, what in the world is it that I find myself loving here? A country? An academic specialty? These certainly cannot love me back. Is it then an aspect of my own studying self? It is hard not to wonder if part of this feeling might not be conditioned, in fact, by my own nostalgia and naïveté. I admit having wondered something very similar when I first read Frazier’s account, especially since he characterized himself as a relative novice. Wasn’t what he described better diagnosed as infatuation than love, and even more than that, as a sort of infatuation built on literary and cultural stereotypes through which we, those of us who grew up with a thorough dose of Cold War drugs in our veins, could not help but see in the country and its people?

When Frazier answers someone’s question about what kind of literature he writes by saying the true kind, it reminds me that I didn’t read nonfiction to find out things before traveling to Russia on my first trip, as a student in 1987. Perhaps that says something about my naïve self then, but I think it also says something about the place we all thought we were visiting, the imaginary space, the construct in our heads. The Yugoslav author Predrag Matvejević, whose father was a “white” Russian who emigrated from Odessa to Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1920s, notes several times in his *Eastern Epistolary* the literary filter through which he and his generation saw all things Russian. I don’t know to what extent that filter exists anymore, or is colored in quite the same shades. Then it rested on a rather Tolstoy cum Dostoyevsky base with shades of Akhmatova and Turgenev, Gogol and Mandelshtam, Pushkin in his more gothic moments, a tinge of Zhivago, as much from David Lean as from Pasternak, and big splotches of undigested Solzhenitsyn (apologies if this is making you

queasy). You could spread some Chagall and Kandinsky, Mussorgsky, Stravinsky, or Shostakovich over that and the whole would be no less harmonious. It wasn't about economics or political science. Russia was "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." Reading to find things out was never going to explain it to you. You needed to commune, soul ready, head securely in the clouds. Put on some Tchaikovsky. Be ready to weep.

I am overstating this a little but not by much. Culture was a major vehicle for getting you in and for understanding things once you got there. Culture and commodities, rather: you brought the commodities to educated, cultured people in need, with whom you made contact through previous Cold Warrior students, and the locals supplied the rest. Sometimes it was concealed culture, all the more powerful because it was assumed to be authentic, something one needed to work hard to find, "reading between the lines" of official pronouncements, talking with people in whispers and signs and never from a payphone on the street corner, as if we were all taking part in a John le Carré novel. There was something deep down that was still there, we believed, a kernel of the real culture that had been overlaid by all this Soviet patina. I recall the shock of recognition—this was what it felt like—when, returning during the hard immediate post-Soviet times of the mid-1990s, I saw beggars under the stopped clocks on Nevsky Prospekt who were not just beggars but beggars *out of a Dostoyevsky novel*, as if they'd been in hiding, their costumes ready for the moment they would need them again, and here it was, down to the long beard, the knapsack stick across the shoulder, the drunken, watery eyes, and the ostentatious genuflections. With rare exceptions, all this culture we were experiencing was also decidedly Russian, even when it was Soviet.

There had been a time when this was not the case, especially early in the history of the USSR, when Lenin, who abhorred the legacy of Great Russian chauvinism, pursued a somewhat less Russia-centered cultural policy. But from the 1930s on, and especially after World War II, Russian and Soviet high culture tended to be coterminous both inside and outside the country, which meant it was so also to us, even if the local distinctions internally might have persisted. So Kazimir Malevich was as Russian as Nikolai Gogol, Ilya Repin, and Vladimir I, regardless of the fact that they all came from the territory of current-day Ukraine, and all were part of the greatness of Great Russian Culture, a major component of which was the Great Russian Language, for which Ivan

Turgenev, in a late work with the telling title *Senilia*, provided the winged phrase “velikii, moguchii, pravdivyi russkii iazyk,” or the “great, powerful, righteous Russian language.”

Many of us knew better. Many Russians knew better. One of my closest friends in 1980s Leningrad would use a short form of the Turgenev phrase, always with irony: “Do you speak ‘great powerful?’” “Oh, your friend speaks ‘great powerful’ so well!” Some of us insisted on making the distinction between Russian and Soviet, but if it wasn’t a kind of cognac, a national costume, or a specialty dish of, let’s say, Georgia, few risked the label of “national particularism” that would have accrued to anyone insisting on how Soviet high culture and the high cultures of the USSR’s constituent republics were not the same.

This conflation of all the USSR into a single “great” country that was basically an imagined Russia extending over the whole had serious consequences for the ways we studied and taught it, which I’ll get to shortly. It also tended to insert more of Russia into some areas than was actually there and create outright lacunae elsewhere on the map, where entire countries and peoples became invisible. In his 2018 *Ukraine: A Nation on the Borderland*, Karl Schlögel refers to Ukraine as a terra incognita for Western scholars, to say nothing of the general public, for whom the country has tended to be seen as “mere periphery, a backyard, glacis, sphere of influence or buffer zone, an object for others to handle, not a subject with its own vision of its history and the right to organize its life as it sees fit.”² While he wrote these words after Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2014, they resonate even more strongly today; nor is it, of course, Ukraine alone that falls into this category.

STUDIIRUS

THERE IS PLENTY of inconsistency in the chauvinism, if not racism, operating in our imaginations as we attempt to apply names for national and cultural belonging across widely divergent times and places. In this sense, it’s clear enough to see the differences between, let’s say, the cultures of Buryatia or Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Pointing out that the Chukchi or Evenki are not Russians is perhaps not even necessary. Characterizing them as the same might even be offensive. But the *translatio imperii et studii* that links the Russia of the late nineteenth century to formerly Russian imperial territories in today’s Eastern Europe appears more deeply embedded in our thought patterns. There the Empire—still or

again is hard to say exactly—lives on, in part through how people like me, my teachers, and my students have studied, written about, and taught it to generations of U.S. Americans. This, I think, is part of what makes it hard for many nonspecialists to distinguish between Russia and the Baltic States, Russia and Moldova, Russia and Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. In some mental maps, one can toss in Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, and, at their fuzzy edges, trans-Caucasia and more. Like that giant turnip in the Tolstoy story, it will take some collective effort to yank such notions up by their roots, but doing this is especially important in today's conditions, where misinformation routinely enables authoritarianism and all its concomitants, including genocide.

It is not only in higher education where the institutions of imagining Russia—the *studii* in the medieval formula I've invoked here—have been perpetuated. At the beginning of the latest stage of the war, after Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24, 2022, there were statements of shock and outrage by some at the violence being perpetrated against people who “look like us.” Witnessing our reactions to images of middle-class white refugees fleeing the bombs and destruction immediately pointed out to many how thoroughly race and class shape our understanding and assumptions about where such things happen and to whom. Some even claimed that the sheer volume of news coverage and the attention we paid to the war in those early days was racially conditioned: we didn't pay such attention, they noted, to Yemen or Syria when they were attacked in recent years by outsiders, or boycott the cultural products of those who perpetrated the attacks. And look, moreover, at how many times the sovereignty of African countries has been violated and how infrequently (probably never) the principle of a nation's sovereignty has, as a consequence of such a violation, been championed by so many countries around the world.

All this is true. But there are other reasons to explain why we continue to feature Russia's aggression in our discussions of what is happening in the world today—beyond the scope of the war, the potential use of nuclear weapons, the violence against and destruction of Ukrainian heritage, the deaths of tens of thousands, and the displacement of millions of Europeans who “look like us.” Beyond and in addition to all this, there is a sense in which we are built to address this war, or rather, in which we have constructed our understanding of the world in order to address it. Just as the U.S.'s intelligence services have performed well—surprising even some allies—in providing accurate and timely

information about Russian goals and strategies, so too in the U.S. and Europe, analysis has been detailed, constant, and frequently of high quality. The reasons are the same. The U.S. intelligence agencies were an epiphenomenon of the Cold War. So too was a major portion of the U.S. culture industry.

Academic departments such as the one I belong to, which had its start in 1947, are not the exception but the rule. Such departments have provided instruction in the languages and cultures of the USSR and the independent post-Soviet states of Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia to several generations of U.S. students, and they have tended to do so with long-standing disciplinary conventions. Our students have typically read histories of Russia that incorporated the USSR and all its constituent republics. They have read anthologies of Russian literature that included the works of the Eastern Slavs without distinguishing among them, treating them all, in effect, as if calling them “Russian” were good enough. They have read analyses of the Russian mind, the Russian spirit, Russian epics, Russian chronicles, and Russian tales that all happen to be also Ukrainian, Byelorussian, sometimes even Polish, though you wouldn’t know this unless you looked very carefully, sometimes not even then. Editors and publishers of more popular works have followed a similar set of conventions, using “Russia” and “Russian” as a catch-all term in introductions, the occasional footnote, titles, subtitles, and advertisements. It’s hard to say who was following whom in the establishment and proliferation of these contours, especially as popular culture has highlighted them in even greater relief. Imagine the deep Russian espionage cell that has become so much a part of upper-middle-class American suburbia that it is indistinguishable from it; imagine the kids in school, the mom in the PTA, the dad hanging out with the neighborhood dads by the barbeque with a beer, talking about local sports; and you’ve got the premise to dozens if not hundreds of that racist notion I mentioned above: they look like us but are not us.

I have often wondered, in fact, if Winston Churchill’s line quoted above regarding the enigma of Russia might not derive from a similar way of thinking. In this light, Churchill’s 1939 quip, quoted ad nauseam as a “definition” of Russia, and fed to U.S. students of the country for as long as our cultural industry has been constructing this myth of “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma,” might be qualified something like this: Yes, they look a lot like us with their blond hair and blue eyes. They seem to be Europeans, having at least some of the same

heritage and a history of similar aristocratic, gentlemanly institutions that we Europeans understand. They might, indeed, seem to be the sort of people with whom one could come to an honorable agreement and expect them to hold up their end of the bargain. Don't be fooled.

THE USES OF PUSHKIN

I ONCE HAD an argument with a colleague about who had more depictions around the world, Lenin or Che Guevara. We decided Che was dominant in terms of T-shirts, but Lenin would be hard to surpass in terms of statues. Across the length and breadth of the USSR and many of the former Soviet satellite countries, he was ubiquitous. Here standing in “classic” pose, cap on head, index finger pointing the way forward, there in relaxed mode, one hand in his pleated pocket, the side of his long coat thrust back, over there obviously holding forth, his trench coat flying behind like the cape of a superhero. In granite and marble, in snow and rain, amid busy city traffic, at the entrance to national preserves, raised up high or sitting at eye level, he was everywhere, across thirteen time zones. He was a marker for ideology and influence, as well as history (“Lenin was here!”) and political belonging.

Pushkin did similar work in the cultural sphere. I have the impression that their interchangeability grew more pronounced toward the end of the USSR's existence. In some ways both came to function equivalently to the use of Tchaikovsky at the state funerals of Soviet leaders—as conventional expressions of Soviet national belonging. It is remarkable, in this context, that so many Pushkins remained standing for so long after the country's demise. Such markers, when combined with a history of colonial oppression, also highlight the peripheral, secondary nature of any local culture that isn't at the center of power. Pushkin passed through here once, which makes it important, they suggest. Otherwise, not so much. This, of course, also tends to empty Pushkin of most of Pushkin and to color the rest of him with a particular tone.

The formula used by Elif Batuman, who writes in her *New Yorker* essay from January of 2023, “Re-Reading Russian Classics in the Shadow of the Ukraine War,” in which she insists to herself that “it's not about Pushkin, it's about Putin,” misses the mark on multiple counts. The desire to maintain a distinction between culture, especially high culture, and the military aggression of the country's leadership is understandable enough. Respect for such culture might, in fact, be why the Pushkins

often remained in place for so long, despite their colonial associations. But not seeing the political uses of Pushkin as a means of marking the power differential between a political center and its “provinces” is hard to fathom. It is not so much a question of either or, but one of and. The uses of Pushkin have put him in league with Putin.

When Vladimir Nabokov, from a modernist perch that feels quite out of place at the moment, refers to those of us who identify with the characters in books as “minor readers,” he in effect calls us out for our naïveté, our willful self-limiting of perspective such that we refuse to see the larger context of a work and its various parts. Something yet more radical has happened to Pushkin in this context. He has undergone a kind of cultural kenosis, an emptying of the literary and cultural figure, such that there’s really no need to talk about interpretations anymore, only intentions and animosities. War has a powerful way of making us all into minor readers.

WOUNDED CLASSICS

SUSAN SONTAG’S 2001 *New Yorker* essay “Loving Dostoyevsky,” which has given me my title and epigraph, preceded Batuman’s essay by just over twenty years, though it feels like more. It both contrasts powerfully Batuman’s more recent reflections but also, ironically, anticipates and prepares the way for them. The essay’s full title, “Loving Dostoyevsky: The Recovery of the Novel ‘Summer in Baden-Baden,’” echoes the Bulgakov line lovingly quoted above, just as it does his great novel. I realize I call it great, in part at least, because it echoes and amplifies the cultural industry that produced the market for it in the U.S. This, too, is part of the *translatio imperii et studii*, the framework of rump empire that has accompanied Russian studies in the West for all my life. I cannot help thinking, in fact, that it was intended for me, in a way, and others like me.

In a scene that seems almost invented for this context, that is, for a world in which “manuscripts don’t burn,” Sontag reports having stumbled upon the French translation of Leonid Tsypkin’s novel as she browsed the stand of a Parisien bouquiniste along the Seine. The work was unknown at the time except among a handful of specialists, and her discovery both helped bring it into the light and insert it into the study of the Russian “classics.” It was thus a recovery of something lost, an important piece in the puzzle of “great” Russian literature, and a crucial part of the study of those works that have helped to define not

just a field of inquiry but the understanding that many of us share of the country itself. In this we have long adopted a naïvely anachronistic approach to reading specifically Russian works: a pseudo-anthropological fashion that suggests, often without spelling it out, that one can in fact learn essential things about Russia—the Russian mind, the Russian spirit, that “riddle wrapped in . . .” etc.—by reading not just Russian literature but Russian literature *of the nineteenth century*. It’s why we care about this “recovery” of a lost classic, and it’s why Batuman writes about reading the Russian classics in today’s Ukraine.

Sontag’s descriptions help to clarify some of the features of our shared understanding. When she observes, for instance, that Tsyppkin wrote “without hope or prospect of being published” and asks rhetorically, “what resources of faith in literature does that imply?” (100), we “recall” that Russians routinely put art above profit, live in poverty, sacrifice fame, defy the censorship, write from prison, and so on. Russians love art. Art is truth. Literature shows us this. Tsyppkin’s tortured road to authorship is equally poignant. Sontag remarks on his repeated requests to emigrate and repeated rejections, the loss of his job and years of internal exile, during which he survived by translating technical works on medicine, until, at last, his *Summer in Baden Baden* was published in a Russian émigré weekly, *Novaia Gazeta*, in New York:

Early on Saturday, March 20th, his fifty-sixth birthday, Tsyppkin sat down at his desk to continue work on the translation of a medical text from English into Russian—translating being one of the few possibilities of eking out a living open to refuseniks (Soviet citizens, usually Jews, who had been denied exit visas as well as fired from their jobs)—suddenly felt unwell (it was a heart attack), lay down, called out to his wife, and died. He had been a published author of fiction for exactly seven days. (101)

Tsyppkin’s story is tragic, and Sontag describes it powerfully. As far as I know, it is also true. Perhaps it’s familiar in part because his experience was the experience of many others. But, I want to claim, that’s not the only reason we accept it with a knowing internal certitude, the feeling that it’s not just true but also somehow correct. This is part of that Russian myth we’ve been working with, here replete with a starving artist who might as well have been living in a nineteenth-century garret, and reinforcing it from time to time, with the Russian “classics” at its core, using them in turn a bit like the Russians have used Pushkin, to build an image of a place and a people in our minds and, for some of us, our hearts.

Yet Sontag's essay is remarkable for another reason, one that helps sharpen the question of both my own ambivalent attraction, the sense that the *lungo studio* and *grande amore* of an entire field are at odds with each other, and also the deep wound that continues to bleed as we witness what Russians have done to Ukrainians in recent days. "How can we explain," she writes, "the vicious anti-Semitism of 'a man so sensitive in his novels to the suffering of others, this jealous defender of the insulted and the injured'? And how [can we] understand 'this special attraction which Dostoyevsky seems to possess for Jews'? . . . Tsytkin has no better explanation than the fervor of Jews for Russian literature . . . Loving Dostoyevsky means loving literature" (103). I so wish I could conclude with a similar thought, something to the effect that "loving Russia means loving Russian literature," but I won't even try. The fact that the classics have probably always been wounded—all one had to do to see this was look more carefully—doesn't help either. We have to tell a different story, one that doesn't depend so much on the wounded classics that we keep trying to heal, and use to heal ourselves, by rereading them.

POST-COLD WAR STORIES

IN HER 2011 book *Cold War Civil Rights*, Mary Dudziak explains the two-part strategy of the U.S. federal government in its decades-long battle with the U.S.S.R. over the U.S.'s embarrassing civil rights record. The continued Jim Crow laws and segregation, not to mention lynching and other acts of violence perpetrated against U.S. citizens in many parts of the country, made it hard for the U.S. to compete for influence against its Soviet adversaries around the world. Enacting federal legislation was one strategy the government adopted, and the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965 was connected with this effort. The other was a narrative of gradual progress it decided to tell, of slow improvement over time, a story my generation grew up with, just after the Civil Rights Movement *per se* but before the end of the Cold War.

It is a brilliant analysis, the thesis of which has been tested repeatedly since the end of the Cold War. What would one expect to happen (assuming Dudziak's thesis were correct) in a post-Cold War America, when the threat of Soviet expansion meant the U.S. federal government could afford to abandon its aggressive efforts to improve civil rights at home? A weakening of the Voting Rights Act? A backslide into previous,

deep-seated racist attitudes and behaviors? An increase in hate crimes and racially motivated violence? It pains me no end to see this, but it is what I see, along with my own youthful naïveté in believing a story about the inevitability of improvement over time.

This story of gradual improvement, which I grew up with, along with that of a Russia that was deeply defined by the humanism of its classics, were made of the same hopeful post-WWII American fabric, now wearing thin. They were also recipes for parallel forms of complacency, if not resigned acceptance of the way “those people” are, rather than how I now want to see each of them, how I hope we can all see each of them: as a narrative that calls for us to work together, take hold of the cat’s tail or the dog’s, to grandma or grandpa, and pull that damn thing out. So we can plant something new, nurture it, and watch it grow.

NOTES

¹Ernesto Galli della Loggia, “Noi e i Russi il Grande Equivoco,” 11 June 2022, pp. 1, 36.

²Karl Schlögel, *Ukraine: A Nation on the Borderland* (Reaktion Books, 2018), p. 39.